Independence Day 2005
Duty, Honor, and Freedom

Independence Day in the USA means different things to different people. For countless Americans, the Fourth of July means a day off, an afternoon at the beach, and hot dogs on the grill. For me, this weekend is a time for reflection, admiration, and thanks to those in the past who have sacrificed greatly to establish and protect the freedoms we take for granted today. Particularly this year, it is also an occasion to recognize the men and women who are currently risking their lives so we, and others around the world, may enjoy “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

The summer of 2005 is a particularly difficult period for the USA and other countries, including Australia, that have joined the battle against terrorism. The military activities in Iraq and Afghanistan have dragged on for over three years, costing the lives of over 1,744 U.S. servicemen and -women and leaving some 13,000 seriously wounded. A far greater number of Iraqi military, police, and civilians have been killed and wounded by relentless, coordinated terrorist bombing attacks. Many other Iraqis have been found tortured, blindfolded, bound, and murdered by insurgents who hope to disrupt their country’s progress towards democratic self-rule.

The terrorists have partially succeeded in turning the opinion of many Americans against the struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan. The seemingly endless death toll and monetary cost have discouraged many of us, particularly as our culture has conditioned us to expect instant answers to problems.

Unfortunately, the war against terrorism cannot be served up for Americans as fast as a Big Mac at a drive-through or a high-speed Internet download. Wars are measured in years, often decades, and dark days and setbacks must be expected.

- In the American Revolution, the British almost wiped out George Washington’s army in New York before he made his famous surprise crossing of the Delaware River.
- During the first three years of the American Civil War, the North lost many battles and endured far greater casualties than the South. President Lincoln was constantly pilloried and lampooned by the press and his political opponents, but he held on until ultimately slavery was abolished and the Union saved.
- In the first months of America’s involvement in World War II, our military suffered loss after loss until the tables were turned in the decisive Battle of Midway, not far from Hawaii.
- In the early days of the Korean War, Seoul was lost and allied forces almost forced off the Korean peninsula before the risky landing of U.S. troops at Inchon turned the tide of battle.

With instant, worldwide television coverage of today’s battles, many armchair generals lose patience when progress seems slow or reversals occur. Politicians seeking headlines abet this mood. This was certainly true of the Vietnam War where U.S. domestic impatience led to the withdrawal of American forces even though militarily, the battle was slowly being won.

With the march to freedom progressing slowly in Iraq, the same home-front discouragement and political opportunism are again starting to manifest themselves, although thankfully not yet to the degree seen during the Vietnam era.
It is legitimate to second-guess the decision to go into Iraq, but now that we are there, I believe we must stay the course. To do otherwise would hand the terrorists a monumental victory. The battle would then inevitably shift back to U.S. soil and other targets around the globe, as it did during the past decade. If one has any doubts, just think about the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, and the September 11 highjackings that ended in massive death and destruction in New York City, Washington, D.C., and a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

There are currently 135,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and 18,000 in Afghanistan. As we light up the barbeque grills this weekend, we should take a moment to give thanks to these 153,000 men and women, about 0.05 percent of our country’s population, who are making it possible for the rest of us to enjoy the day in freedom.

No one makes this point better than Adm. Jeremiah Denton. Adm. Denton was a Navy pilot who was shot down and spent eight years in a North Vietnamese prison. As related by California Assemblyman John Campbell*, in 1966, while Denton was in prison, he was interviewed by North Vietnamese television in Hanoi after torture to get him to “respond properly.” During this interview, he blinked his eyes in Morse code to spell out the word “torture.” After his eventual repatriation and a distinguished military career, he was elected to the U.S. Senate from his home state of Alabama.

In a speech to a group of state legislators about the meaning of the Fourth of July last year, Adm. Denton said that the war on terrorism may be the most difficult war we have yet fought. And he went on to say that he fears that partisan attacks on our mission and our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan sound too much like the Vietnam experience. In his words:

* The full text of Assemblyman Campbell’s communication, dated June 30, 2004, can be found at www.breakthechain.org/exclusives/johncampbell.html